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"We don't get to stay the same way we started": *The walking dead*, augmented television, and sociological character-building

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Abstract: The dominant turn towards transmediality across the contemporary media industries has brought a range of emerging digital innovations and new possibilities for telling stories, be it in interactive television experiences, apps, social media, and so on. Despite such rich possibilities, the transmedia phenomenon has also arguably led to a kind of indirect flattening out of how we now understand different media forms, platforms, stories, and even characters. This article will explore the character-building practices that have been employed in augmenting the televisual experience of *The walking dead* (2010–present) across platforms. It looks at *The walking dead: Red machete* (2017–2018), a six-part webisode series available on AMC's website, the AMC Story Sync facility (2012–present), a double-screen application designed to enable audiences to post live comments about the episodes, respond to surveys, and talk to other audiences via a chat platform, and finally AMC's *Talking dead* (2011–present), a 30-minute accompanying talk show. I demonstrate how these three examples of what I call *augmented television* draw on sociological and anthropological notions of communication, modern social life, and environment in ways that present chances for what I call *sociological character-building*.

Keywords: augmented television, character-building, sociology, The walking dead, world-building

The dominant turn towards transmediality across the contemporary media industries has brought a range of emerging digital innovations and new possibilities for telling stories, be it in interactive television experiences, apps, social media, and so on. Despite such rich possibilities, the transmedia phenomenon has also argu-

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ably led to a kind of indirect "flattening out" of how we now understand different media forms, platforms, stories, and even characters. The word "content" is now used to describe everything from film and television to games and digital ads, with commercial notions of "brand" equally dominant across media industries. Or as Jan-Noël Thon argues: "In light of the largely uncontested saliency of the representation of characters, stories, and worlds across media such as novels, comics, films, television series, and video games, however, media studies still tends to operate with a surprisingly vague account of transmedial entertainment franchises' 'converging contents'" (2015: 22). In the case of this article's interests, understandings of character have been typically minimalized within scholarly discussions of media's pervasive spread across multiple media platforms.

Which brings me to this article's first objective. *The walking dead* – first broadcast on AMC on October 31, 2010 – tells the tale of a group of survivors who, following the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse, must work together to not only survive but to create a new world order with new social structures, new values, new modes of communication, and entirely new ways of living. The television series is arguably at the forefront of how digital media technologies are now being used as both storyworld- and character-building apparatus; its extension platforms are constructed via apps, webseries, chat shows, as well as the likes of augmented reality, mobile gaming platforms, and social media channels, each of which afford unique interactive opportunities to build (or contribute to) storyworlds (see Wolf 2012). While these various digital platforms have certainly not escaped the clutches of academics (see Evans 2015; Kennedy 2018; Vann et al. 2018), far less attention has been paid to what the technological affordances of these kinds of digital platforms mean to ideas of character-building. This article will explore the character-building practices that have been employed in augmenting the televisual experience of *The walking dead*. It looks at Internet content – *The walking dead: Red machete* (2017–2018), a six-part webisode series available on AMC's website, the AMC Story Sync facility (2012–present), a second-screen application designed to enable audiences to post live comments about the episodes, respond to surveys, and talk to other audiences via a chat platform, and finally AMC's *Talking dead* (2011–present), a 30-minute accompanying talk show. I will demonstrate how these three examples of what I call *augmented television* draw on sociological and anthropological notions of communication, modern social life, and environment in ways that present opportunities for specific kinds of *sociological character-building*.

Which brings me to this article's second objective. Of all our contemporary media constructs, imaginary worlds demand perhaps most clearly an interdisciplinary research approach, as they are entangled in dynamics of fictional cultures, peoples, histories, politics, places, spaces, and so on. Yet ironically few

attempt to analyze explicitly how different disciplinary approaches can yield greater understandings of imaginary world phenomena, including their characters (see Boni 2017; Wolf 2017). This article does precisely that, making a deliberately transdisciplinary contribution to the study of character-building by looking across different disciplinary perspectives. I thereby build on my earlier proposal to consider storyworlds as innately *social* phenomena (see Freeman 2019). Specifically, by drawing on concepts from the fields of sociology and anthropology, I consider how the aforementioned three media artefacts each build on the characters of *The walking dead* by contributing what Marie-Laure Ryan (2014) calls *mental events*, which refers to the ways in which characters react to the physical events within their storyworld, or to the inner motivations and reflections that shape those physical events. As Ryan explains:

> Physical events cannot be properly understood without linking them to mental events. In the case of actions, these mental events are the motivations of the agents, and in the case of both actions and accidental events, such as earthquakes, they are the emotional reactions of the affected characters. Now if mental events are as much a part of a story as physical ones, then storyworlds are actually narrative universes made of [...] the beliefs, wishes, fears, goals, plans, and obligations of the characters. (2014: 36–37)

To clarify, Ryan's notion refers to the two-pronged analysis that can be directed to any set of fictional events within a storyworld, both the actual, physical events that are seen (e.g., the act of killing), and the more psychological dimensions of characters relating to those physical events (e.g., reflections on, motivations for, or reactions to the act of killing). While much work on transmedia storytelling considers the former approach (see Jenkins 2006; Scolari 2009), it is far less common to consider how specific platforms in a given transmedia story shape the latter. In this instance, then, it is useful to extend our discussion of the term *character* – going beyond mere on-screen fictional depictions – by also analyzing the extra-diegetic iterations of these characters (i.e., the actors who play these characters and what they say about them publicly), as well as the ways that audiences themselves can "become" characters in the world of the story via the use of augmented television technologies and platforms. And for that reason, a sociological approach – and social theory – becomes a fitting means by which to make sense of the world-building described throughout this chapter. Much social theory is rooted in the critical assumption that social order is not a linear or vertical process, i.e., where all macro forces "drip down" to dictate operations of micro actions below, but instead acknowledges that social order is a feedback-feedforward process where agents and structures mutually enact social systems as reciprocal cycles (see Giddens 1984). Conceiving of character-building in this way – i.e., as a sociology – allows us to consider the function of different digital plat-

forms in affording aspects of character-building based on a similar feedback-feedforward cycle between producers and audiences (see Freeman 2016: 69–70). As will be analyzed via the aforementioned webisode series, chat show, and Story Sync app, these three platforms each offer character-building dynamics based on their communicative affordances that in turn produce transmedia narratives based principally on emotion – or, rather, on the emotive reflection triggered by juxtaposing two temporally staggered media platforms. Methodologically, throughout the article I make use of a range of primary research materials, such as an online survey completed with around 150 *The walking dead* fans, itself conducted via *The walking dead* fan sites and forums; I will also conduct text and discourse analysis of both the *The walking dead* media texts and the online paratexts relevant to the platform in question.

Conceptualizing augmented television

Before I delve into precisely what I mean by this idea of "emotion-building" or analyze the specifics of *The walking dead*'s augmented television platforms and their attempts at what I describe as sociological character-building via the likes of webisodes, talk shows, and story sync apps, I will begin this article by first outlining some of the key theoretical pillars needed to conceptualize transmedia character-building as an augmented televisual form, pointing to ideas of connected viewing and transmedia distribution.

So, first of all, what do I mean by augmented television? Scholarly discussions in the present often concern the multi-platform potentials of the digital media economy (see Doyle 2015; Evans 2011; Holt and Sanson 2014). Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, for instance, discuss "connected viewing," which refers to "a multi-platform entertainment experience, and relates to a larger trend across the media industries to integrate digital technology and socially networked communication with traditional screen media practices" (2014: 1). From this, "second screen" practices have materialized, where portable media devices, such as smartphones or tablets, are used alongside the television screen to access online material that relates to televisual content. Companion apps such as those for *The x factor* (ITV 2004–present) provide gaming opportunities or additional behind-the-scenes material. For Elizabeth Evans (2015: 124), indeed, second screen artefacts demonstrate how fundamental transmedia practices have come to be for the television industry and its audiences – in particular, how transmedia strategies facilitate a form of "mediated glance," referring here to television's innate tendency to be "treated casually rather than concentratedly" (Ellis 1982: 128). This idea of users engaging with second screen artefacts via a "mediated glance" will

be explored in terms of its character-building value for the AMC Story Sync facility shortly.

But whereas important technological shifts towards connected viewing may have led in some cases to "the migration of our media and our attention from one screen to many" (Holt and Sanson 2014: 1), augmented television describes more than companion apps, and unlike Evans' notion of "transmedia television" (2015), does not necessarily cross different kinds of media. We can think of "augmented television" as an umbrella label, with "connected viewing" merely one aspect of this larger practice. There is the much more traditional spin-off talk show, for instance, such as *The xtra factor* (2004–2015), a companion show to the aforementioned *The x factor* broadcast on ITV2 straight after the main ITV show ends. Companion talk shows, broadcast as they are straight after episodes of their parent series, open up ideas of temporality in terms of our understanding of augmented television. Television, especially television broadcasting, is a fundamentally temporal medium. Even as larger changes such as streaming allow audiences to access television content whenever they choose, the temporal qualities of television persist. Television's liveness, its ability to broadcast events as they happen, is often held up as a defining characteristic of television broadcasting (see Carroll 2003; Gripsrud 1998). Moreover, it is Raymond Williams' model of television as "flow" that most usefully brings the temporality of television together with the temporality of transmediality. "Flow" has become one of the foundational models of television studies, and is regarded as a defining characteristic of the medium itself (see Gripsrud 1998). The organization of television's flow into a schedule functions as a way to structure its endlessness (see Ellis 2002) and to frame programme content for audiences (see Weissman 2017). According to Williams (2003 [1974]: 93), the flow of related, unrelated, and semi-related content units is a planned part of television's structure. As Evans (2015, 2018a) has discussed, television, in essence, is a collection of different segments of content brought together into a larger whole and guided by an ever-present, though invisible, time-based organizational structure. Later this understanding of television will be considered in terms of its character-building value, both for *Red machete* and *Talking dead*.

Beyond the "flow" of talk shows, webisodes are a good example of what Will Brooker once described as "television overflow" – that is, "the tendency for media producers to construct a lifestyle experience around a core text, using the Internet to extend audience engagement" (2004: 323). For our purposes, it is useful to consider the form of the webisode in terms of digital distribution, i.e., to analyze when such content is made available online so to make sense of its world-building value. Alisa Perren argues that the changes wrought by digital technologies have placed a spotlight on the key area of concern when thinking about distribu-

tion: "the ways that content moves through space (flows) and time (windowing)" (2013: 167). In taking Perren's definition of digital distribution, the connections to transmediality become clear. Evans argues that transmedia logics are also about the ways in which content moves through space and time. She explains how "the various ways in which transmediality manifests [...] are fundamentally tied to practices of distribution. Transmedia storytelling or marketing, for instance, rely on distribution strategies that carefully spread content across different media platforms and spaces" (Evans 2018b: 243). Some of the distribution strategies of the media forms discussed in this article may be online, while others may be broadcast more traditionally, but, importantly, they are all grounded in the workings of television. That is to say that they all often make use of innately live, ephemeral, and/or interactive digital affordances that open up transmedial environments based on practices of communication around and reaction to a television series. In effect, and as will now be explored in relation to *Red machete*, the Story Sync app, and *Talking Dead* – in the first case through an anthropological lens, in the second case through a sociological lens, and in the final case through a combination of the two – these three forms of augmented television are all characterized by the crafting of a temporality based on reaction and reflection.

The walking dead: Red machete

How, then, do these developments afford character-building dynamics in *The walking dead: Red machete*? Answering this question means thinking anthropologically. Put simply, cultural anthropology is the comparative study of the manifold ways in which people *make sense* of the world around them, while social anthropology is the study of the *relationships* among individuals and groups (see Dube 2007; Eriksen 1983; Monaghan 2000). As we shall see, *The walking dead: Red machete* webisodes delve into character relationships, while the *Talking dead* chat show helps audiences to make sense of the imaginary world in emotional terms. The AMC Story Sync app, meanwhile, does both. Anthropology is a broad, cross-cultural and integrative discipline, concerned with the environments in which people live, and the material, social, and ideational cultures that serves as a buffer between human beings and their environment. Out of that broad framework comes a number of key anthropological concepts, such as "adaptation," which in this context focuses on understanding human societies in terms of how they react to and utilize the environments in which they live (see Cohen 1974; Giddens 1984). Applying this anthropological concept of "adaptation" to an analysis of character-building in *The walking dead: Red machete* webseries becomes useful since it extends ways of thinking about transmedia characters towards

more sociological questions to do with how characters react to their fictional environments and how the affordances of the webisode format open up opportunities for audiences to understand character dynamics via the "flow" of their online release schedule (see Evans 2015).

The walking dead: Red machete is a six-part story about the origins of the infamous red machete used by Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) to kill Gareth (Andrew J. West) during Season 5. Released during Season 8, the webisode series, as AMC billed it, "follows the path of a red-handled machete from its innocent beginnings on a hardware store shelf at the start of the apocalypse, as it lands in the hands of survivors good and evil, familiar and new" (O'Dell 2017: n.pag.). Each webisode, running approximately three minutes long, was distributed on the AMC website roughly around a month or so apart between October 2017 and April 2018, coinciding the release of each new webisode with the broadcast date of particular episodes from Season 8.

The potential to release webisodes in almost any way, at any time, raises interesting questions to do with their narrative capabilities and, in our case, their character-building value. As transmedia producer Robert Pratten discusses, "why do some web producers release their webisodes weekly? Why not release them two weeks apart or wait until enough episodes have been produced to release all at once or daily? Why not four hours apart or on demand?" (2011: n.pag.). Pratten's point here is that the freedom of the webisode format means that there can be – and indeed should be – a clear creative reasoning behind the choice to schedule webisodes at particular times, a reasoning that goes beyond simply replicating the traditionally weekly broadcast schedule of television. At the same time, however, the practices of augmenting televisual content means structuring a relationship between different media platforms. As Evans puts it, "the temporality of transmedia content (whether deliberately strategized or emerging more organically) is key to creating transmedia experiences. Transmediality is inherently *about* distribution" (2018b: 243, original emphasis). So what can the distribution choices of *The walking dead: Red machete* tell us about character-building, particularly in terms of mental events?

In short, and despite centering on an inanimate protagonist, i.e., a machete, as it moves from owner to owner, *The walking dead: Red machete* is really a story about how characters emotionally react to loss and trauma, with its scheduling format encouraging viewers to reflect on the passing of time. Narratively, the webisodes exemplify the Giddensian concept of "adaptation," painting the world of *The walking dead* as a place where humans utilize the objects of their environment, e.g., a machete, in order to survive, but also in order to mourn, to remember, and to grow. For instance, in the opening chapter, "Behind us," a character named Mandy (Anais Lilit) witnesses her younger sister devoured by a zombie;

then, in the second chapter, "Sorrowful," her father is bitten by a zombie and dies off-screen. The story of these chapters, told without dialogue, is thus one of both physical and mental events, the latter centering on Mandy's emotional journey from shock, to trauma, to acceptance. Importantly, by staggering the release of these chapters over months, the viewer is denied the chance to witness this emotional journey in continuous terms; instead, a passing of time is imposed upon the viewer, at least for those who watched the webisodes when released. Moments from earlier chapters, such as Mandy's name being carved into the handle of the machete, are revisited in subsequent chapters, creating a space where past physical events are reflected upon and remembered long after the fact, rather than just reacted to immediately. This affords a stark emotional transformation for Mandy's character, based on time passing for both characters and audiences.

When examined through the lens of "flow," too, *The walking dead: Read machete* webisodes can be understood as working to frame the viewing experience of the main television episodes' content, but not necessarily narratively. The webisodes certainly fit the description of transmedia storytelling, where "integral elements of a fiction [in this case, the origin story of the red machete] get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins 2007: n.pag.). But the narrative of the red machete does not tie into the plot of Season 8, nor is it intended to, despite the webisodes being released to coincide with the broadcast of a number of that season's episodes. We must therefore understand the relationship between Season 8's episodes and *The walking dead: Red machete* less in terms of plot and more in terms of the televisual "flow" of "related, unrelated, and semi-related content units" (Williams 2003 [1974]: 93). As noted above, all of these particular webisodes are without dialogue, creating a visual style that, as their director Avi Youabian describes, is "very musical, [making] the sound design score the actual narrative – and through editing, it builds to a crescendo and finally releases" (quoted in Grobar 2018: n.pag.). The musicality of the webisodes encourages an emotional, rather than a cerebral, reaction, thus framing the experience of watching *The walking dead* across multiple media in emotional terms based on the organization of time. In effect, the distribution pattern of the webisodes allows audiences to make some kind of sense of both the world of *The walking dead* and its particular characters in quite cultural anthropological terms. For example, one fan, documenting their thoughts on the webseries on the official *Walking dead forum* site, states: "It makes you think quite philosophically about how many other things that we don't even think about that the group has have been in other hands" (myherorick 2018: n.pag.). Another fan notes: "It really got me thinking about how the lives of characters are shaped by the journeys of everyone, or everything, around them" (saveme 2018: n.pag.). By focus-

ing on and returning to the object of the seemingly arbitrary red machete at different points in time, emphasising the changes of the characters around it as caused by a range of mental events, like emotional reactions to personal loss and trauma, *The walking dead: Red machete* webseries can be argued to outline a sociology for the storyworld: This world may be without civilized structure and order, but the actions of its characters and their emotional reactions still form meaning out of the chaos.

The AMC Story Sync app

This relationship between time, emotional reaction, and digital platform is augmented even further via AMC's online Story Sync application. The AMC Story Sync could first be used during the premieres of new episodes of *The walking dead*, beginning in 2012. It promised audiences the opportunity to "interact with the show while watching the premiere broadcast of the latest episode of AMC's *The walking dead*. Join the community of fans in weighing characters' decisions, rating the gore and rewatching intense scenes" (The walking dead wiki 2018: n.pag.). Story Sync includes trivia questions, polls, exclusive videos, and pictures that relate to the new episode being broadcast, affording immediate reaction and interaction. Given the fact that the fictional milieu of *The walking dead* is so devoid of the sorts of media communication technologies characterizing this article's object of study, there is an ironic tension in place between the ways in which its characters have become accustomed to react to fictional events and the ways via which audiences can now communicate with others about those events across multiple screens. This tension is why it is so useful to turn to sociology or anthropology when making sense of *The walking dead*'s character-building, for, broadly speaking, these disciplines seek to grasp the full range of human experience, including the ways in which people react to circumstances.

In essence, the AMC Story Sync app affords character-building via what Anthony Giddens famously theorized as "reflexivity" in sociological terms. For Giddens, there are three main elements that explain "the peculiarly dynamic character of modern social life" (1991: 16), with "reflexivity" being one of these. According to the author, the modern individual can no longer rely on prescribed social truths or predetermined life trajectories with the advent of new technologies, but has to reflect upon information, recommendations, norms, and ideals emanating from a variety of (mediated) sources. In other words, Giddens' notion of reflexivity is really speaking to the same social processes that become tied to Ellis' aforementioned idea of the "mediated glance" in televisual terms, since the "modern individual," i.e., the television viewer, is now able to look across a variety of screens

and digital interfaces when engaging with, say, an episode of *The waking dead*, and must, in turn, be prepared to reflect on what they see. Said episode may well be "treated casually rather than concentratedly" (Ellis 1982: 128), in the sense that viewers are glancing to and from the episode alongside a range of other second-screen practices. The narrative information gained during a mediated glance to and from the AMC Story Sync app, however, carries significant character-building value, working to reinforce or contextualize a character's choices.

Consider one example. Season 7's premiere episode, "The day will come when you won't be," was a particularly intense experience for audiences, featuring as it did the death of both Glenn (Steven Yeun) and Abraham (Michael Cudlitz) at the hands of Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan). The episode also sees Rick emotionally tortured by Negan. At one point, he is required to play a game of fetch with an axe amongst a hoard of hungry zombies before coming close to being forced to cut off his own son's arm with that very axe. Accompanying the broadcast of this episode, the AMC Story Sync app gives, in a certain sense, clear insights into the motivations of the characters. The app begins, for example, with a quote from Rick from Season 5: "There's a compound bow and a machete with a red handle. That's what I'm gonna use to kill you." The confident, threatening quote juxtaposes with the image of Rick seen during the Season 7 opener, where he appears emotionally broken by the deaths of his friends and submissive to Negan's violent demands. In effect, the quote presented via the Story Sync app is like a transmedial equivalent to having a flashback within the episode, denoting Rick's and Negan's character motivations as essentially the same. Elsewhere, features on the Story Sync are very much orientated towards the emotions of the viewers rather than those of the characters, asking viewers, for example, to vote whether they are more frightened to find out about what just happened or what is about to happen.

As with Giddens' notion of social reflexivity more broadly, some of the Story Sync's features may appear to be banal, such as still images taken from the episode, while others point to more life-encompassing decisions that give shape to the storyworld's mental events. Even the still "freeze frame" images within the Story Sync app, however, such as one shot of Negan thrusting his axe into the face of a physically and emotionally battered Rick, hold significant world-creation status. Kevin Moloney talks about the role of photography as "one of many media forms a producer might use in a transmedia project" (2018: 181). It might be possible to mistake such photographs for nothing more than a mere illustration of a point made in another media form; then again, the photograph might be seen as a kind of self-contained story. It works independently of its companion media forms as much as it complements them. Moloney, in fact, shows how a photograph – a single media image – is capable of bringing together both physical and mental narrative events that co-exist and extend, at least in the viewer's mind,

beyond the borders of the photograph itself. The author argues, for instance, that for producers of transmedia projects, "the critical thinking about photographs must not only be how they interact with other media forms used in a project, but how they are also autonomous stories, capable of rich, immersive narrative, fine detail and visual fact presentation" (Moloney 2018: 181–182). The observation here is that photographs, as a form, are capable of capturing a complex range of human phenomena, both physical (i.e., actions), and mental (i.e., emotion, reactions), all frozen within the frame.

In the case of the aforementioned freeze frame image of Negan thrusting his axe into Rick's face, and thinking about this image as a transmedia extension, the image deliberately forces the viewer to focus on something that otherwise might have been merely glanced at on television. Negan's goal and motivation to emotionally destroy Rick and abolish his sense of leadership are emblemized in this image, as is his belief in his own dominance over anyone who threatens him. The strength of this image in transmedial terms lies in its intensity, capturing Negan in close up in a way that denies the viewer a means to escape from the intensity of the television episode, and instead further engulfs the viewer in the drama, brutality, and violence depicted in the scene by denying the chance to glance elsewhere. Such freeze frames are thus not merely accompanying images, or even entry points into the storyworld, but could be considered the seeds of transmedia stories in their own right.

In another case the Story Sync includes a "flashback" feature, which, in this instance, revolves around a set of black-and-white still images of the characters, scattered across the screen and, crucially, depicting moments of laughter for characters such as Glenn and Abraham. Colin B. Harvey (2015) argues that memory is always important to transmedia storytelling, given that audiences are required to remember the specificities of characters and events when they migrate across multiple media. But, in this case, the images directly shape how viewers react emotionally to the deaths of Glenn and Abraham in the television episode, reminding audiences of moments of prior happiness that jar uncomfortably with the sight of their violent deaths. While the images dramatized on television prioritize emotions of shock, the still photographs available via Story Sync encourage feelings of melancholy and loss. In other words, it is not so much a fictional narrative that is being constructed transmedially across television and the Story Sync app as it is the emotional reactions of the audience. As one fan, surveyed for the purposes of this article, asserted: "The second screen experience of the Story Sync lets you immediately contemplate what is happening on screen, that second." Encouraging such heightened emotional engagement is achieved by all sorts of strategies by the producers, such as designing features on the app that force users to empathize with a particular character. For example, accompanying the Season

6 episode, "No way out," Story Sync asked users: "Who are you most like?," with images of the cast available to choose from. The users can then answer a range of questions based on their own motivations, preferred actions, and emotional reactions, allowing users to engage with and enact the story's mental events. Only at the end of this particular Story Sync feature did the user discover which of the characters they resemble the most – and, importantly, whether their personal motivations, actions, and emotional reactions would have seen them surviving the events of the episode or not. This kind of live, interactive feature cannot help but encourage users to reflect deeply on their own individual life choices, raising questions about how our inner ideals may fit into a predetermined life trajectory. Far beyond Harvey's more individualized idea of transmedia memory based on remembering aspects of plot during the process of migrating across media, the AMC Story Sync app represents a form of transmediality based on exploiting the juxtaposition of narrative past and narrative present, which works to underscore the "reflexive and self-organizing potential of transmediality on the level of culture, [as] each additional version of a text or its fragment influences the ways in which we understand and remember the source text itself" (Ibrus and Ojamaa 2018: 90).

Other features include viewers being able to vote on how they would have responded to actions or choices depicted during the episode. In "The day will come when you won't be" episode, Negan tests Rick's determination to escape by leaving his axe in a reachable position. On the Story Sync app, viewers then voted whether or not they "would have grabbed the axe, too," with 54 % believing this action was "worth a shot," compared to 44 % who would have waited had they been in the same position. This voting system sets up what can be described as a kind of collective intelligence for how to behave and react in the world of *The walking dead*. The voting tool may not provide any further insight into Rick's character beyond what can be gauged via the television episode, but it does allow users to engage with the story's mental events, i.e., creating a sense of what it would be like to actually live in this storyworld, with urges of survival (i.e., represented by the choice to reach for the axe) paired with "kill shot" images on the Story Sync (in this case, of blood splattered across a windscreen) that establish this world as a place where inner motivations to survive are threatened as much by humans as zombies. Again, such an idea can be understood as part of the sociology of the storyworld, and it is one that is defined and communicated via the relationship between multiple media platforms. The "collective intelligence" of the interactive Story Sync audience also works to clarify the inner beliefs, wishes, and goals of characters in cases where such motivations may be hidden or ambiguous, as they are in the case of Negan's torturous handling of Rick throughout the opening Season 7 episode. At one stage, the Story Sync app asked

viewers to cast their vote on whether "Negan's mostly…" "seeing what Rick's got" (30 %) or "teaching him his place" (70 %). In effect, reinforcing a particular reading of Negan's motivations via clear statistics based on the views of other, simultaneous audiences works to populate the storyworld with notions of what Ryan calls mental events, with audiences ultimately reinforcing particular motivations, emotional reactions, beliefs, wishes, and goals for the characters.

Talking dead

With *The walking dead: Red machete* webisodes augmenting the televisual experience of *The walking dead before* the live broadcast of each episode, and with the AMC Story Sync app augmenting this experience *during* the live broadcast of episodes, it is the role of *Talking dead* – a live television chat show that discusses episodes of both *The walking dead* and *Fear the walking dead* (2015–present) with cast and crew members as well as with celebrity guests – to continue augmenting this experience *after* the television episodes have come to an end. There is thus an integrative aspect to *The walking dead*'s augmented television platforms, one that aligns with the disciplinary ethos of sociology and anthropology, which both assume that *all* aspects of *all* people's experiences belong together as an indivisible subject of study. How, then, do the accumulated experience of people – audiences, producers, on-screen, off-screen – work together to shape how individual characters react to events within their world?

The answer to this question lies in the way that *Talking dead*, first broadcast in 2011 and now up to 150 episodes at the time of writing (2018), effectively works to provide audiences with insights into the traumas and losses experienced by the characters in the television series. In that sense, and continuing with our Giddensian approach, *Talking dead* affords character-building via what Giddens calls "social disembedding," itself another element to describe modern social life. "Social disembedding" refers to the "'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time-space" (Giddens 1991: 18). This "lifting out" of social relations is sustained by so-called "expert systems," which, according to Giddens, include professionalized forms of knowledge that stretch across boundaries and saturates the lifeworld in different parts of the world through technological innovations. It also provides advice given by various practitioners as experts (doctors, therapists, scientists, etc.), either directly or through media. Similarly, the structure of *Talking dead* provides audiences with the opportunity to reflect upon information, recommendations, norms, and ideals emanating from a variety of (mediated) sources, namely the television series itself, but also the other discourses communicated across other

channels. In effect, *Talking dead* helps audiences to make sense of the characters in emotional terms.

Consider a 2014 episode that followed the broadcast of "Coda," the 8th episode of Season 5, airing on November 30. "Coda" featured the death of Beth Greene (Emily Kinney), and the corresponding episode of *Talking dead* featured actress Kinney herself, who discussed the real-life traumas that emerge from working on *The walking dead*, the sadness that comes from being killed off. As Kinney discussed during her interview:

> Shooting the episode was stressful, because you're not just leaving the character [...]. I had a whole life out there, as we all do. [...] The thing is, it is a job, and I was dealing with all the things that you would deal with for any job that you're working on for a number of years, like I had an apartment out there. I had to deal with all those logistics of moving, getting rid of my apartment, plus knowing I won't see all my friends all the time. [...] So I had to deal with my real life while also wanting to give the kind of focus that I wanted to give to the show. (TW Dead 2015: n.pag.)

What is not apparent from the above transcript is the fact that Kinney was on the brink of tears during her interview, with host Chris Hardwick reassuring her throughout with tissues and comforting words: "It's sad, it's okay." There is thus a tenderness and humanism to *Talking dead* that carries character-building value in so far it contributes enormously to the emotional fallout and emotional reaction from the events depicted in either *The walking dead* or *Fear the walking dead*. It is, in effect, a space for cast, crew, and fans to reflect on and mourn the horrors that come *from* these two television series. The key to this idea lies in what host Hardwick says at the very end of his interview with Kinney: "I think it's helpful for people to see you like this." In other words, and as with the character-building of the AMC Story Sync app, *Talking dead* also focuses on feelings of melancholy and loss, lifting out the emotional reactions of affected characters from the local context of a television episode and rearticulating these reactions, i.e., the world's mental events, across the discursive, reflection tracts of a companion chat show. Once again, it is not so much a fictional narrative that is being constructed across platforms as it is the emotional reactions of the real people involved.

We can understand the "flow" between *The walking dead* or *Fear the walking dead* to *Talking dead* in similarly emotional terms, with AMC holding their audience's attention across these programmes by providing opportunities for catharsis or closure that start in the former and end in the latter. AMC is thus using the chat show to contribute insights into the beliefs of the characters via the comments of the actors who portray them. For example, in another episode of *Talking dead*, this one following the broadcast of "Wrath," the Season 8 finale where the "all-out war" between Rick and Negan reaches its climax, actor Andrew Lincoln

explains Rick's thought process during the fight scene where he decides to spare Negan's life:

> Well, it's the moment when [Rick] realizes that killing isn't gonna take the pain away [...]. It's when he learns his lesson. It's really just vengeance up until that point and I think he realizes, when faced with killing Negan, where he's about to go, what he's about to become. And I think in that moment, that fleeting moment, that's when he decides that if he doesn't try to save [Negan's] life, it's over. So I think ultimately it is a story about restraint rather than revenge and love rather than hate, which has always been so integral to our show. (Wendell TWD 2018: n.pag.)

In that sense, *Talking dead* clarifies Rick's inner, but long-since-forgotten belief in the importance of rebuilding the civilization that once defined the world, augmenting the "why" of a key mental event by contributing what Giddens might describe as a professionalized form of knowledge, with Lincoln operating here as the "expert system" in a chain of transmedia content. And, upon hearing Lincoln's "expert" views on the inner beliefs of Rick, audiences posted their reactions to these views on Twitter, which were then read out live on *Talking dead* by Hardwick: "Thank you, Andrew, I felt let down in the moment but I see now that you're right – Negan does need to live." Clearly, audiences were able to learn and to make greater sense of the mental events (i.e., Rick's motivation) surrounding a particularly dramatic physical event (i.e., Rick opting to spare Negan's life) via the process of reflection, something that was itself afforded via the temporality of two pieces of television, with their innate liveness structuring this reflective relationship. As another fan surveyed during research for this article reinforced: "I am always watching the TV show with my phone in my hands, and I really like to search the Twitter hashtags to see how others feel." The concept of "flow" may have been threatened by new digital media technologies, but *Talking dead* entices people to experience the world of *The walking dead* live by constructing an "in-the-moment" emotional temporality across multiple programs.

Conclusion

The contemporary television landscape is becoming increasingly characterized by streaming and other online strategies that allow access to television content via laptops, tablets, and smartphones. In some ways, the technologies via which we now engage with television content disentangle the watching of television from any particular temporality. Yet, the likes of Netflix and Amazon operate as part of a television industry that has adopted inherently transmedial approaches to distribution that work to augment these televisual experiences across platforms. To

paraphrase Evans (2018a) from earlier in the chapter, transmediality is about the strategically organized *temporal relationships* amongst a range of platforms and channels. This article has reiterated the importance of the relationship between a linear and clearly established viewing temporality (a televisual "flow") and the affordances of what I have called "augmented television platforms" in understanding the value of these platforms in character-building terms, specifically analyzing what these technological collisions between analogue and digital televisual forms mean to practices of character-building and character-consumption.

On the one hand, the innately live, ephemeral, and interactive digital affordances of the webseries, app, and chat show analyzed throughout this article work to enrich and expand the storyworld's characters – namely, in terms of their mental events and how audiences engage with and reflect on them – via their communicative capabilities. For as has been hinted at already, the depictions and fallouts of mental events in a story are highly suited to the nature of transmediality, since the former deals with cause and effect relationships between actions and their emotional affects, while the latter provides a structure for these actions/emotional affects via an organized, temporal relationship between multiple platforms. As argued throughout, this temporal relationship between platforms orchestrates the emotional reactions of audiences.

On the other hand, speaking more broadly, television is not just available at home through the television set; it has since expanded onto buses and trains, into cafes and waiting rooms. In other words, television has opened itself out to being shaped by and integrated with the daily practices of social (and sociological) conceptions. It is logical to open up analyzes of contemporary television and its character-building formations to the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, since the latter explicitly serve to make sense of relationships between multiple groups of people and their changing (communicative) environments. I have shown – via the case of *The walking dead* – how the sociological concepts of "reflexivity," "adaptation," and "social disembedding" become useful analytical tools for describing a particular sociological kind of character-building. These concepts should encourage researchers to rethink the building of fictional characters as a cross-platform process based on memory and reflection, characterized profoundly by the passing of time.

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